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The Virgin Mary: A Liberator for Women

Rachel Egan

Mother of God. High Princess. High Mother. Sister. The Goddess. Mother of the Church. These are just some of the representations that people identify with the Virgin Mary. But which way is right? Can we really know who the Virgin Mary is? These are the types of questions that theologians, who are studying Mary, constantly have to ask. There have been many ways to go about answering these questions. These differing ways have led to some confusion about the validity of the answers. However, one thing is for certain: "every age has attached to Mary some of its most highly prized religious and cultural values."¹

One of the contemporary ways to look at what or who Mary is not is to look more in depth at the doctrines developed within the Second Vatican Council. One of the doctrines that many people wanted included within the constitution was one giving Mary the title of co-redemptrix. Vatican II did not give Mary this title, nor did Pope John Paul II whom many have said has a special place in his worship for Mary. An article entitled, "Vatican: no new Marian dogmas," attributes this denial of the title of co-redemptrix as an agreement with critics who "have described the title as heretical, claiming that it would give Mary equal status with Christ and replace the Trinity with a Quartet."² Avery Robert Dulles in his article, "Mary at the Dawn of the New Millennium," argues that even though Vatican II did not designate Mary formally as co-redemptrix or as Mother of the Church that Pope John Paul II grants Mary the title informally, within what Dulles denotes as the "Pope's Mariology."³ Pope John Paul II has designated Mary as the "Mother of the Redeemer, Mother of divine grace, [and] Mother of the Church," qualities that are associated with a co-redemptrix.⁴ The Pope granted Mary these titles informally while denying that "Marian teaching is a devotional supplement to a system of doctrines that would be complete without her."⁵ By arguing this, the Pope affirms the need for Marian devotion with-

in the Church; however, informally Mary has been given praise, formally she has been kept as a subordinate.

From this discrepancy in thought in the Church itself, several questions arise. These questions may include how such a discrepancy within one structure can arise and develop? In terms of this discrepancy, how is Mary to be perceived and what attributes are to be given to her? Is there any one way of knowing what is to be attributed to Mary and what is not? Also if "many would like Mary to hold [the] titles of co-redemptrix, mediatrix of all graces, and advocate of the people of God," then why do the officials of the Catholic Church, namely the Bishops and the Pope, formally deny this request while informally implying that the titles should be granted?⁶

One of the main reasons that there is such a discrepancy within the Catholic Church is that our perceptions are based not just on the factual information that we have on her life within the Biblical narratives but also on how people now perceive her. These differing views lead to confusion about Mary. First, there are the perceptions that people have about Mary, which as George Henry Tavard writes, reflect the lives of those who worship her.⁷ This matter has been discussed above in the discussion on the historical periods and their views on Mary within Cunningham's article. In addition, there are discrepancies found within the Biblical narratives concerning the persona of Mary.

The Second Vatican Council articulates that through the Biblical narratives Catholics can find evidence which places Mary "in the Church and not above it."⁸ However, how can one find truthful evidence of who Mary is when there are discrepancies within the Biblical stories themselves? Pheme Perkins in her article, "Mary in the Gospels: A Question of Focus," argues that discrepancies within the Gospel stories themselves may lead to confusion on the actual roles and qualities that are to be attributed to Mary. She argues that within the Gospel of John, Mary is seen as playing an important role within Jesus' life and service (John 2:1-12).⁹ She then contrasts John's picture of Mary with the pictures found within the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Within these Gospels, the Virgin Mary appears only to make a "christological point."¹⁰ Mary is only seen as almost an afterthought, only appearing to give credit to the humanity of Jesus and to his ministry. Therefore people are not sure what to think. Do they give great credit to Mary, as John does, or do they think of her as an afterthought following the examples of Matthew and Luke? This is also one of the main questions of the church that has led to debate and to the uncertainties that surround the perceptions of Mary.

Some people within the Church, including Pope John Paul II, seem to be in favor of giving Mary greater credit. This can be seen in the attributes given to her and through the amount of work that has been done by Catholic theologians on the topic of Mary. There are many ways of describing who Mary is to those who believe in her divine presence and who hold a special place in their devotions for her.

R. Scott Appleby, agreeing with Saint Anselm of Canterbury, describes Mary within his article, "In the end, a Mother's love," as a "woman marvelously unique and uniquely marvelous ...through whom the elements are renewed, hell is redeemed, the demons are trampled underfoot, humanity is saved, and angels are restored."¹¹ He goes on to argue that there are many ways to perceive the Virgin. One of these ways is in the light of the feminist revolution. He argues that feminists coming to terms with Mary as a symbol of 'ultimate womanhood,' cast her either as a model of independence and woman's liberation or, in the words of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, as a submissive pawn of a "theology of woman preached by men to women and one that serves to deter women from becoming fully independent and whole human persons."¹²

Mary can also be seen in other ways as well. Appleby argues that Mary, first and foremost, is seen as the Madonna, the prototype of all mothers, able to achieve enduring joy, hope, and faith, and capable of deepening the levels of love and trust between people. Mary also showcases the role of parenthood as an association with the experience of the divine.¹³

Appleby goes on to argue that within her numerous post-death appearances, such as at Guadalupe and Fatima, Mary is able to "ease the tension between divine justice and divine mercy."¹⁴ In each of these instances, Mary appears to a member of the community that is suffering, thus fulfilling the Pope's depiction of Mary as "the embodiment of the church's preferential option for the poor."¹⁵ Appleby deepens this perception of Mary as the Mother of the Poor by arguing that Mary has the "ability to suffer with the suffering, to deepen love in the face of deprivation, to work for the elimination of injustice..."¹⁶

This quality of Mary as the epitome of the preferential option for the poor is a manifestation that is explored by other theologians as well. Gracia Grindal argues that Mary needs to be seen as the epitome of the person who comes to help the poor and not to covet riches. Grindal argues that this is especially evi-

dent in the biblical evidence concerning Mary (as a rule applied by Vatican II); within Luke 1:46-53, Mary delivers what has become known as "the Magnificat." Within the "Magnificat," Mary speaks of "mercy, breaking spiritual pride, putting down the mighty, exalting the lowly, filling the hungry, and sending the rich away empty."¹⁷ Grindal argues that to the poor, Mary sings that God gives what is right and what is good.¹⁸ As many of these qualities are the same ones associated with the work of Jesus, it is possible to give to Mary the same qualities and to associate her ministry with Jesus.

Mary can also be described as the church's first theologian.¹⁹ Patrick Miller gives two reasons for attributing this distinction to Mary. First, he argues that there is evidence within the Bible of profound theological contemplation by Mary. He offers as an example the first musings within the Bible of Jesus' significance and as a result, the first christological reflection by Mary on the role of her Son.²⁰ He argues that this is evident within Luke 2:19 when "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."²¹ Miller also argues that Mary is the first theologian, as the "Scriptures seem to suggest that the primary theological work at those moments, certainly in birth, infancy, and childhood, belongs to mothers."²² From this Scriptural argument, one can therefore assume that Mary's influence and guidance led, at least in part, to the ministry of Jesus. The second reason that Miller attributes the title of the "First Theologian" to Mary is her theological poem, the Magnificat. The Magnificat is, as Miller argues, an expression of faith in that Mary identifies with the lowly, over and against the rich within Israel.²³ Therefore, along with Mother of God, Mary is also given the attribute of the First Theologian of the Church.

Taking these characterizations into account, Mary can be seen as the perfect woman in the church. This perfection of a woman who is associated with the divine and the human provides a comparison to which all women are subject. This comparison with the perfect Mary is a major concern for many women today within the Church. Some say that the comparison is valid, because Mary is the ultimate symbol of womanhood. Others argue that they cannot be compared to Mary, because since she is the ultimate ideal, she is unreachable.

David VanBiema discusses this dichotomy of thoughts, with Mary being the impossible possibility, in his article, "Mary, So Contrary." VanBiema argues that Mary can be seen within two lights. In one light, she can be seen as "the Second Eve, Paragon of Chastity, Queen of Heaven and Blessed Mother."²⁴ This would be part of the Ideal Mary that a woman can only strive to be like but can never

achieve. He also argues that throughout history, there are certain women who "were inoculated against the Virgin as they embraced feminism," because of this ideology of the ideal.²⁵ Since human women are not the same as the "Idealized Mary," they should not be forced to be compared with her. One of the women whom VanBiema speaks of is Sally Cuneen. VanBiema argues that, "Cuneen qualifies as a Catholic Feminist. She is painfully aware of the line that runs between Saint Athanasius' 4th Century contention that Mary 'remained continually at home, living a retired life and imitating a 'honeybee' and [the] impossibly pure, impossibly obedient 'Housewife Mary' rejected by many of Cuneen's peers in the 1960s."²⁶

The dichotomy that exists is explicated even farther by Catharina Halkes and Edward Schillebeeckx in their book, *Mary: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. They provide two different views from Roman Catholic theologians which can express the dichotomy which VanBiema brings to light. The authors argue that around Vatican II, there were two dominant views of Mary. The first being Mary as our sister, the model member of the community of faith, and a second having Mary placed alongside of Jesus Christ as the Mother of the Church.²⁷ The authors, however, have differing views in regards to which one of these representations is best and why.

Schillebeeckx, a conservative Roman Catholic theologian, argues that Mary is to be seen as our sister. Mary "must not be put on the side of Jesus Christ, but on the side of the community of faith, which is on the receiving end."²⁸ Halkes, who is a feminist Roman Catholic theologian, argues that Mary must be seen as "a symbol of openness to the mystery of our existence and of prophetic power."²⁹ Halkes arrives at this theology as a result of her feminist ideologies which are based upon the historical experience of suffering of women, "their psychological and sexual oppression, infantilization and structural invisibility as a result of sexism in the churches and society."³⁰

Schillebeeckx does not agree with the viewpoint of Halkes, and within his part of their book, he points to why he thinks that Mary is more a sister than a mother to the church. Schillebeeckx argues that the problem arose during Vatican Council II as a result of discrepancies surrounding representation of who Mary was. He maintains that the proper way to represent Mary is through showcasing her as our "companion in redemption"³¹ and thus as our sister who can be set alongside us. Mary is not as divine as Jesus and is subject to his salvation, just as we are, and therefore is subject to be placed alongside us rather than in a more divine position. He goes on to argue that when people do explicit devo-

tion to Mary, they are presupposing the dogmatic developments of the place of Mary within the system of salvation of Jesus.³² He argues that Mary is to be seen as a disciple like us rather than an equal to Jesus Christ. In his Apostolic Injunction *Marialis Cultus (On the Veneration of Mary)*, Schillebeeckx places as evidence for his association with Mary as Sister to Pope Paul VI's identification of Mary as our Sister rather than as our Mother.

Schillebeeckx offers in his theology a quest for a pneuma-christological mariology, purely on a New Testament basis.³³ He identifies the mariology of Mary as sister with a mariology focused upon Jesus.³⁴ He goes on to say that Mary is our sister in faith because she had to deal with the pros and the cons of her son's involvement, and she had to ponder her relationship with God and with her son just as we do.³⁵ Schillebeeckx argues that Mary is to be praised only because, like a good disciple of Jesus, she "has heard and held fast to the Word of God."³⁶ This can be validated by Luke 11:27, in which Jesus said, "In fact, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it." Schillebeeckx finally argues that we are to look at Mary as our sister, because "what accounts for Jesus is not the biological side of her motherhood, ...but the consistent expression of belief in God in action."³⁷ We are thus to follow this model as we would look up to an older sister and follow her example.

Catharina Halkes, however, has a very different interpretation of this. Halkes, as I have said before, is a feminist Roman Catholic theologian. She argues that Mary has been primarily used as the ideal figure whom women, world-wide, should strive to become. But Halkes argues that this is an impossible ideal to reach and thus only works to oppress women rather than to lift them up and offer them a legitimate place within the Catholic Church. While this is an ideal, it is an oppressive one in that Mary is given a place of inferiority to the male Jesus. Halkes would like to change this representation of Mary in order to give her a place of honor and give her the same importance that is given to her son. Therefore, Halkes would like to describe Mary as the Mother of the Church alongside of her son. She argues that Mary is deserving of this title as she is "the first of the believers of the new covenant" of her son.³⁸ She is due her honor because her faith is a "fulfillment of the faith of Abraham, since it is a covenant faith in which she receives the Redeemer but at the same time gives him to the world."³⁹ She goes on to argue that there are two people, both Mary and Jesus, who are involved in the Incarnation, even though the Patriarchy of the Catholic Church only seems to recognize one.⁴⁰ Finally, Halkes argues that Mary is deserving of the title, Mother of the Church, because she is "the image of the

person in Christianity who came closest to the divine by [being] completely filled with the Holy Spirit."⁴¹ Therefore, Mary, in Halkes' eyes, must be placed on the same level of Jesus as Mother of the Church as a way to give her deserved honor and to allow women an opportunity to reside on the same level as men.

The issues that Halkes raises are issues that many other feminists raise as well. What would the feminist reflection on these qualities and personas of Mary be like? Sally Cuneen, described briefly earlier, argues for the feminist interpretation of Mary within her article, "Breaking Mary's Silence: A Feminist Reflection on Marian Piety." Cuneen argues that disagreement about the role of Mary is in keeping with the history of Marian devotion.⁴² The dichotomy arises when certain aspects of Mary, namely her roles as Mother and her virginity, are separated from the rest.⁴³ She argues that for an image to be a true image of Mary, it should "resemble the Mother of Jesus as she appears in the Gospel stories, for there is no other historical evidence of her existence."⁴⁴ Cuneen argues that if this were done, then there could be no confusion as to who Mary is. Also people would not be able to take only certain aspects of Mary and make them more important than others, and people would thus not be able to make her the ideal which ordinary women cannot reach.

Cuneen argues that throughout history, Mary has been viewed by taking one or two selected qualities and making these define where she is. Cuneen argues that this was done in early Marian ideology, within the Church, where Mary was only used when establishing the humanity of Jesus. At other times, Mary's apparent lack of faith and her impatience, such as the wedding in Cana, have been used to define her.⁴⁵ The most popular way of interpreting Mary is through her virginity. This was displayed by the vision of Mary that Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria offered, of Mary as a quiet, selfless woman who was also a Virgin, who belonged to God. Cuneen argues that using these qualities takes the essence of Mary away from her and does not allow her the glory and honor due to her.

Cuneen then goes on to reinterpret the symbols of Mary in a way which allows all women to identify with her and which can be used to show her power and her authority. She argues that the Virginity of Mary does not deal with her sexual inferiority. Rather, it deals with her independence, as no one, except God, had control over her.⁴⁷ God does not even have total control, as Mary had the right to say no to God. Rather, she chose to accept his word and to become Mother of his child. Cuneen shows that by choosing to be the Mother of God,

Mary is also shown to be a mediator between the human and the divine.⁴⁸ She then goes on to argue that the image of Mary as *theotokos*, or God-bearer, is sufficient if it is seen as recalling the spirit-filled woman of Luke's Gospel and her words, rather than just identifying Mary as the Mother of Jesus.⁴⁹ This spirit-filled woman offers strength to other women through their Marian devotion, as well as offering them solidarity.⁵⁰

Cuneen also offers new representations for Mary, other than Mary as the sweet, little Virgin. Rather than seeing Mary as the "new Eve," as many theologians describe Mary, she is to be seen as one with Eve as the Mother of the world, as she brought God's son into the world.⁵¹ Mary should be seen as "representative of all the feminine virtues and perfection."⁵² Cuneen then goes on to argue that "the potential of her [Mary's] presence to evoke the divine feminine and heal divisions without canceling diversity is a tremendous, largely untapped resource" within the Church.⁵³ Thus, from these arguments, it can be construed that Mary deserves a much bigger role in the Church and that her image must be changed in order to further and better the lives of women who are held in inferiority through comparison with the perfect Virgin who herself is in an inferior position.

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2 "Vatican: no new Marian dogmas." *The Christian Century* 114 (24 September - 1 October 1997) 829.

3 Dulles, Avery Robert. "Mary at the Dawn of the New Millennium." *America*. 178 (31 January- 7 February 1998) 9.

4 Dulles, 10.

5 Dulles, 9.

6 Dulles, 10.

7 Tavard, George Henry. "Meeting Mary: the Woman for All Seasons." *The Christian Century*. 114 (5 March 1997) 243.

8 Tavard, 243.

9 Perkins, Pheme. "Mary in the Gospels: A Question of Focus." *Theology Today*. 56.3 (October 1999) 297.

10 Perkins, 297.

11 Appleby, R. Scott. "In the end, a Mother's love." *U.S. Catholic*. 64:10 (October 1999) 40.

12 Appleby, 40. (The feminist perspective will be discussed more in depth, in a later section of this paper.)

13 Appleby, 40.

- 14 Appleby, 41.
- 15 Appleby, 41.
- 16 Appleby, 41.
- 17 Grindal, Gracia. "The Rich are Sent Away Empty." *The Christian Century*. 113 (4 December 1996) 1193.
- 18 Grindal, 1193.
- 19 Miller, Patrick D. "The Church's First Theologian." *Theology Today*. 56.3 (October 1999) 293.
- 20 Miller, 294.
- 21 Miller, 294.
- 22 Miller, 294.
- 23 Miller, 295.
- 24 VanBiema, David. "Mary, SO Contrary." *Time*. 148 (23 December 1996) 66.
- 25 VanBiema, 66.
- 26 VanBiema, 67.
- 27 Halkes, 9.
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- 43 Cuneen, 320.
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- 52 Cuneen, 333.
- 53 Cuneen, 335.